

ON FIRE OR BURNED OUT? INVOLVING YOUNG PEOPLE IN SOCIAL ISSUES

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ABSTRACT

As young people become aware of injustices, their response tends to be one of either getting fired up or overwhelmed to the point of burn out. There is a third way. They may need guidance to pursue a better response, recognizing it requires much more than a quick fix. This third way identifies social injustice and goes beyond the symptoms to root causes and systemic processes. Giving a dollar to a homeless person might do some good, but young people should expand their understanding and practice by asking systemic “Why?” questions. Because of the prevalence of injustice in our world, exposure to multiple needs calls for wise guides and mentors who will engage with young people in a spiritual formation that includes the call a righteous/just God shares with them to replace injustice with shalom.

INTRODUCTION

As Gen Z comes of age, predictions will be tested to see if they are true for this generation. Are they typical of the adolescent stage for most generations, or will they be identified as characteristics unique to this particular cohort? Some have referred to this group as “Pivotals” because they are pivoting away from common Millennial behaviors, and attitudes seem headed toward a socially conscious and diverse era (Fromm and Read 2018, 3).

As digital natives, Gen Z has access to more information than previous generations. This means it won’t be unusual for teens to outpace their parents and possibly even their

teachers in certain topics, activities, or even disciplines. When it comes to social issues, someone from Gen Z can quickly find out what the social issues were for parents and also grandparents in a matter of seconds—without ever having to talk to either generation. But knowing that information doesn’t mean (or guarantee) that they know anything more than one quick sound bite. On the other hand, they may indeed know as much or more than their elders, especially if they have invested in a particular social cause.

A QUICK FIX

You slow down and stop at the traffic light. The dirty, limping, toothless person ambles toward your car window with the handmade sign. What will you do? Ignore the person—like most do? Give a quick dollar or rummage for change through the ash tray inside the car? If the light changes, does that give you enough cause to drive off and leave the stranger? Do you talk yourself out of giving anything since you suspect it will simply be spent on booze? Remember that person who told you these “takers” can make as much as \$40,000 a year, tax-free? Wait, what if the guy is Jesus who has come to test you? Would it be completely irresponsible to invite the person home for a full meal? How ridiculous would it be to invite them to move in with you for a month or two? How many questions can zip through your head in the seconds that pass until the traffic light does change to green?

Perhaps you’ve helped to provide a full meal at your church or some type of soup kitchen—maybe on Thanksgiving before your family ate their feast. Or maybe you’re a “regular” who does this systematically, say, once a month. You get warm feelings for helping others, and you can’t help but whisper a prayer of thanks that you’re not in their shoes.

Some go “all out” and save or raise money to go on a short-term mission trip. After paying hundreds and hundreds of dollars to the airlines, and hundreds more for lodging, food, local transportation, and a special excursion after helping those third-world people, the question might haunt you: Would it have been better for me just to mail the money instead of spending it on myself? Would you have collected so much if it was just a gift you were giving instead of the fee necessary for your “vacation with a purpose”? Does this describe Gen Z, or those who preceded them, or both?

Those who are younger seem more likely to initially respond with compassion. For some this begins a lifestyle

of service. But for many, other things vie for one's time and attention, especially when the helping doesn't generate the same intensity of emotions. What may have started with a rush of fulfillment either becomes more of a chore or possibly degenerates to a burden. What began as an experience that set you on fire may have peaked and now it may be difficult to continue. You might simply feel burned out.

Like so many previous generations, Gen Z seems to be conscious of social issues and ready to comment and even take action. Yet many of the issues they address aren't necessarily the same as previous generations (Combi 2015). For example, Baby Boomers had the sexual revolution of "make love, not war" and "the pill" which made sexual promiscuity even more likely. In contrast, Millennials experienced homosexuality coming out of the closet. Both of these issues are rather passé for Gen Z that highly values inclusivity over sexual orientation as well as sexual practice. For Gen Z, homosexuality is merely part of a string of letters (LGBTQ+) that continued to expand over the past decade.

DEEPER ISSUES

An increasing number of people have asked the simple question, "Why?" when it comes to social issues that are recurring rather than remedied. You fed the homeless on Thanksgiving and then the thought runs through your head, "What do they do the other 364 days of the year?" That's when the why questions begin, such as Why are they homeless? Why do they remain homeless? Why don't others help? Why don't I want to help more? Why is my help not solving the problem? Why do I consider this a problem?

The analogies and metaphors abound. Give a man a fish and he can eat for a day; teach a man to fish and he can feed himself for a lifetime. But you can add a rejoinder like, "But who owns the pond?" or "The man will need to get a fishing pole." Another example is to have an ambulance with paramedics at the bottom of a cliff to help those who drive off the cliff and crash their vehicles. But it might be better to put up a guardrail at the top of the cliff so the cars don't go off the cliff in the first place! Follow up comments to this include, "Who pays for the guardrail?" and "That might put the ambulance company out of business!"

More than a decade ago, Chap Clark and Kara Powell (2007) teamed up to write a book that addressed deeper issues regarding justice—doing what's right. *Deep Justice*

in a Broken World indicates we need more than a quick fix, in addition to the reality that the world in which we live remains deeply broken. This resource considers the physical response as the quick fix response, the relational response as a deeper response, and a systemic response as the deepest response. It then helps to look at the systemic issues that create the need for a response of service. It includes many resources in addition to the process of going deeper than just the superficial quick fixes that actually don't deal with the real problem. Use this to help Gen Z and those connected to them to find the systemic issues and determine the steps to take beyond the short but insufficient responses we regress to so easily.

Recently, Bryan Stevenson's *Just Mercy* showed a similar thing in story format by sharing the work of a talented attorney who chose a cause worth living for rather than an affluent life as a Harvard Law School graduate. Stevenson sought justice for black men in the South who had falsely been accused of murder and sentenced to either life in prison or death. Stevenson found multiple examples of injustice. As he sought to get justice, he discovered that systems and leaders in those systems didn't like him changing the status quo, so they provided a lot of resistance to his drive for justice. This non-religious book begins with the following quotation from the theologian Reinhold Neibuhr, "Love is the motive, but justice is the instrument" (Stevenson 2014, xi). On Stevenson's own journey while practicing law he acknowledged, "I recognized that I had been struggling my whole life with the question of how and why people are judged unfairly" (Stevenson 2014, 13). The various examples given can shock, instruct, and provide reality checks in addition to the inspiring work Stevenson did.

Consider short but deep quotations from significant spokespersons on the topic of social justice. Glean and share; repeat. Here are a few to get you started, beginning with the Neibuhr quotation in the previous paragraph: "Love is the motive, but justice is the instrument." Reinhold Neibuhr (Granfield 1966)

"We have a system of justice (in the US) that treats you much better if you're rich and guilty than if you're poor and innocent." Bryan Stevenson (Stevenson 2015)

"Denouncing evil is a far cry from doing good." Philip Gourevitch (Gourevitch 1998)

"Justice is what love looks like in public." Cornel West (Williams 2017)

Gen Z participants may be ahead of the adults in their lives. Churches run by older people might find addressing the social issues of Gen Z threatening and well beyond their own comfort zone. In such settings, Gen Z will need to exercise patience and pray for grace to pass along to others who may be speaking down to them in condescending ways while possibly being stuck in traditions and quick fixes. But it could also be the opposite. Those older than Gen Z might be the ones who expose them to more than a band aid approach to bigger issues. Emergency situations may call for initial hand-outs, but many of the issues of human suffering require longer-term responses that seek to correct the injustices that envelope those in need.

A STRATEGY OF SPIRITUAL GIFT EXPLORATION

One example of a quick fix way to do ministry is filling out some type of Spiritual Gifts Inventory. Those who do so often do nothing once they receive their test results, which is usually immediate. Have they graduated from serving because they obtained some type of identifiable results, somewhat like a diploma?

A much better way for Gen Z to have the Holy Spirit flow through them in ways the Spirit chooses would be to identify potential places of giftedness. Is it doing something up front or behind the scenes? Something for those in the church or those outside the church? For children or seniors or peers or some other group? The foundational principle is that spiritual gifts are given by God (specifically the Holy Spirit) for his people to continue the very kinds of service Jesus did. When people talk about being “the hands and feet of Jesus,” this is what they mean! It is supernatural, yet practical; experimental, yet joyful.

Help those part of Gen Z to experience a variety of service activities that may seem superficial at first, but can develop as one finds competence (God’s empowerment works), joy (it’s a buzz to have God flow through you), and success (in building up the Body of Christ). If you don’t experience these, experiment with other types of serving. And you need to obtain affirmation from the Body of Christ—the fellowship of believers where you worship and with whom you serve. Spiritual gifts are not given in isolation. As individuals in Gen Z discover their spiritual gifts, it will shape their identity as children of the God who lives in them and through them in service to others.

YOUR CHURCH MIGHT NOT BE ENOUGH

Even with spiritual gifts, it’s quite possible that God’s activity won’t be limited to just those inside the walls of a

church. For example, God provided manna for the children of Israel in their wilderness wandering because they couldn’t obtain that much food in the desert for those 40 years. God could do the same thing today wherever God wanted. God can provide for anyone and everyone on earth without funneling it through his people. But he seems to prefer to do it with his people rather than apart from them.

Some suggest and hope that the church could take care of the feeding those in poverty. Here are the numbers for the United States: Approximately 325,000 congregations. Privately funded food pantries account for only six percent of the monthly food assistance needed. If the congregations took responsibility for the five basic antipoverty programs the US government funds, each congregation would need another \$1.5 million dollars in its budget (Sider and Lowe). How would your congregation do?

The exclusivity of some Adventist churches will need a major transformation in order to integrate with other faiths for the task God has for us. “The systemic injustices in our world are far too powerful and pervasive to be combatted by just one person or even one denomination. If we’re serious about following God’s command to ‘do justice,’ we must struggle alongside others of various faith traditions in the public square” (Nelson-Blake 2014, 139).

“Many younger Christians today consider themselves political orphans and are exchanging civic and political engagement for charitable and community service” (Sider and Lowe 2016, 141). Some may consider this to be positive, but it removes God’s voice from the public square, which isn’t good for Christians, for the government, or for the general public.

RELATING TO POLITICS

We need to find a new understanding and action for how we will relate to governments as we seek to “do justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God” (Mic 6:8 NKJV). This requires a change in how the Seventh-day Adventist Church and its members have related to the government throughout our history, especially in the United States. Because our 19th century eschatology that previously predicted our government would join forces with the Roman Catholic Church and one day rise up against us Adventists, we have avoided government interference in all church-related matters.

But many of our social problems have their roots in unfair structures that proliferate injustice. To live private-

ly as a Christian means having no influence on the social problems and the public square. Our absence indicates we have nothing to say, and nothing to hear. Both are wrong. We must engage in the political process. The Greek word *polis* simply means “the city.” Whenever you get people together, whether it’s a city or a church, you will have politics because you have people. This doesn’t mean we will do politics the same way; in fact, we should expect it will be different. But we need to be present in politics and in the public square because God has a work and social action for us to engage in.

Here’s one example. We currently spend \$4 per senior citizen per year. At the same time we spend only \$1 per person for children from birth to 18 years of age (Sider and Lowe 2016, 158). Why the disparity? Because the people who vote and the people who run the government tend to be senior citizens and they are giving themselves first priority. And we certainly don’t want to pay any more taxes. As a result, we borrow from our children by mortgaging their future. That is selfish, short-sighted, and unjust.

As followers of God, our participation in politics should be expected to be highly different from the typical politics. Our role would be to seek justice rather than to win; to think of others more than thinking of ourselves; to communicate and operate from love instead of from fear. Here are eight things for Christians to utilize in the political process (Sider and Lowe 2016, 145-149).

- Stop trying to reclaim the United States as a Christian nation. (It wasn’t)
- Have realistic expectations for politics and politicians. (Both are human, so they can disappoint, but politics is probably better than alternatives.)
- Avoid being co-opted by a particular party or ideology. (be biblically-based rather than political party-based)
- Overcome our fears to be motivated by love. (so much of politics is fear-driven.)
- Rigorously seek out truth and reject misinformation. (Includes fact-spinning, forwarded emails, inaccurate reports and talking heads.)
- Accept complexity as well as uncertainty. (There’s a lot of gray beyond the headlines.)
- Respond graciously to opposition and hostility. (Opposition is guaranteed in politics, but how we respond is up to us. Hate needs love, not hate. Darkness needs light, not more darkness.)

- Define success by faithfulness, not effectiveness. (Living and speaking truth is more important than getting votes.)

A WAY TO START

Mentioning the word “politics” might have put some people over the edge. Calling for increased engagement might have sounded too extreme in spite of calling for this for different purposes and processes. But you can and probably should start at a much simpler place. Start in your own community with your own congregation. That’s where you can and should engage in social issues. When you include Gen Z in that, it will probably take you to different causes. Do it.

One question to ask is, “If our church facility burned to the ground, would we be missed?” For congregations whose members don’t live in the community where the church is located, it’s very difficult to really be part of that geographical community. You may be part of the Adventist community, but it’s not likely you’ll be part of the community around your church facility unless you do actually live there (Gillespie 2014).

International Justice Mission has created a “Community Justice Assessment Tool for Churches.” You can access this by going to Google and typing the title. Put together a team broad enough to include Gen Z and other generations. Take walks in your community and engage with people. Watch and listen. This provides the input for you to pray individually and as a group. Be persistent and patient simultaneously.

You can also go to the Seventh-day Adventist website and click on “Official Statements.” This includes official statements, guidelines, and documents, such as statements for advocacy and political action in response to poverty and violence against women and children. Even though little or nothing has been done about that, you have denominational support to move forward. Start with that locally.

“For all of the flaws and failures of the church, it is still the case that it is the church that shows up first in justice questions, that by its very life attests to hospitality, generosity, and forgiveness as engines for a livable life for all creatures” (Brueggemann 2018, xx). Do that, and rely on your Gen Z participants to lead the way for what the cutting-edge social justice issues are.

RECOMMENDATIONS

These recommendations are for individuals and groups. Each can be done at all levels of the church and won't be separated by organizational group. This applies to all:

- Identify and prioritize the social issues of importance to you personally. Do the same with your church group—leaders and other participants. Do it with Gen Z input.
- Identify and share quotations about Justice with Gen Z young people and have them share theirs with you. Then discuss their level of importance, how to live them faithfully, and hold each other accountable.
- Lead individuals in Gen Z in spiritual formation that includes the discovery and practice of spiritual gifts.

- Take a new perspective of our involvement in politics to be present to listen, to advocate, and to be true to Godly values rather than selfish ones.
- Go on the SDA Church website and peruse the “Official Statements” section. Use these to act for social justice.

CONCLUSION

Gen Z provides a potential new burst of idealism for justice in an unjust world. Ministering together with wise and deep thinkers can combine youthful enthusiasm with a mature pursuit of justice that includes behaviors and feelings, but also engages with systemic change. God's prophets have done this through the centuries. God's prophetic people will do the same today.

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